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Israel Said to Have Sold Weapons to Iran Since 1981 With Tacit Approval of the Reagan Administration

U.S. Replaced Arms Stocks After Transfer to Tehran, According to Officials

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WASHINGTON—The Reagan administration has known about and given tacit approval for Israeli arms sales to Iran since 1981, according to current and former administration and intelligence officials.

Israel made the sales to Iran and other countries with the understanding that Washington would replace the weapons in Israel's stockpiles, said the sources, all of whom insisted on anonymity.

According to intelligence sources, in 1981 and 1982 Israel sold the Iranians tires and brake assemblies for the F-4 jet fighter and other spare parts, as well as light weapons, ammunition and radar equipment. Iran, locked in a war with Iraq, desperately needs parts to service the U.S. weapons it acquired during the rule of the late shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who was ousted in 1979.

U.S. acquiescence to the Israeli sales never was explicit in 1981 and 1982; no papers approving the sales were prepared or signed and thus the action was cloaked in layers of deniability. The White House didn't officially sanction Israeli sales to Iran until last fall; this year, the U.S. sold TOW antitank and Hawk anti-aircraft missiles to Iran.

But if top U.S. officials knew about Israeli arms sales to Iran almost since the early days of the Reagan administration, it suggests that the roots of the administration's Iranian crisis go much deeper than last week's debacle resulting in the resignation of National Security Adviser John Poindexter and the dismissal of National Security Council aide Lt. Col. Oliver North.

Although for years there have been murky reports of Israeli arms sales to Iran, administration officials have said their involvement didn't start until late last year. Indeed, Secretary of State George Shultz has suggested that he had only fragmentary knowledge of any U.S.-approved arms shipments to Iran until a few weeks ago. Pentagon officials have said Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger also wasn't fully informed.

An early indication of U.S. acquiescence to Israeli arms sales to Iran surfaced in October 1982, in a little-noticed interview that the then Israeli ambassador to the U.S., Moshe Arens, gave to the Boston Globe. The Israeli diplomat acknowledged that Israel, in coordination with the U.S. "at almost the highest levels," had been supplying arms to Iran. "Subjects and items were discussed (with the U.S.) at almost the highest levels," Mr. Arens declared.

According to the current and former U.S. officials, top administration policy makers—including Secretary Shultz and his predecessor Alexander Haig, Secretary Weinberger, and then White House Chief of Staff James Baker—knew in 1981 and 1982 about the Israeli arms shipments to Iran and decided against trying to stop them. It isn't known whether President Reagan knew about these sales.

In public, the administration long has stressed its opposition to any and all arms sales to Iran. But officials who ran "Operation Staunch," the name given to the administration's effort to stop the flow of arms to Iran, as well as other senior officials, say they never were told not to protest Israeli sales.

"A lot of countries were shipping things to Iran for different reasons," an aide to Secretary Weinberger said. "Our policy was to discourage that." Pentagon intelligence reports showed that Israel, North Korea and China all were making shipments. But the aide said, "I don't believe that Secretary Weinberger personally would have acquiesced" in the arms sales by Israel. A State Department spokesman said Mr. Shultz couldn't be reached yesterday for comment.

Two sources said Mr. Haig was briefed on the Israeli sales to Iran in preparation for a Feb. 20, 1981, meeting with then Israeli Foreign Minister Yitzhak Shamir, who is now Israel's prime minister. But they said Mr. Haig decided not to raise the issue.

Replenishing Israeli Weapons Stocks

"This thing goes back to 1981 and much of the cabinet knew about it," said a U.S. military source. "Shultz was involved, Baker knew, Weinberger knew, and Haig knew about it before he left." Another U.S. intelligence source contended: "It was implicit that any time the Israelis sent anything anywhere . . . that they would be compensated. If they sent their own stuff, it was understood that we would replace it. Israel would never incur any costs or drawdowns of its own stocks, even if we hadn't explicitly asked them to make the sales."

Israeli Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin has insisted that his country never resold American-made arms or U.S. parts of Israeli weapons without explicit U.S. permission. "We aren't so stupid to endanger the very generous and vital American assistance to Israel," Mr. Rabin told the Los Angeles Times in September.

Officials said both Israel and the U.S. hoped that the arms sales would curry favor with the military people in Iran, the so-called moderates, helping to position these men to take over if Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini died or there was a coup.

In his 1982 interview with the Boston Globe, Mr. Arens said the aim of the Israeli program "was to see if we could not find some areas of contact with the Iranian military, to bring down" the Khomeini regime. Mr. Arens also called the size of the arms sales "inconsequential," saying they consisted mostly of spare parts for the Iranian military's U.S.-made equipment.

After extensive interagency discussions about Iran early in 1981, U.S. sources said, cabinet-level officials concluded that modest Israeli arms sales could serve Western interests by strengthening moderates in the Iranian military and by preserving at least a modicum of Western influence in Iran.

Concern Over Soviet Influence

At the time, one source said, U.S. officials were especially worried about the potential influence of Iran's Tudeh (or communist) Party, which later was attacked by Iranian authorities, and about the possible growth of Soviet influence in Iran after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini.

Administration officials said Mr. Haig began to have second thoughts about Israeli arms sales to Iran in 1982, in part because he feared that the longer the Iran-Iraq war continued the more dependent both sides would become on Soviet-bloc arms. In a May 1982 speech, he called for halting the flow of arms to both Iran and Iraq.

After a spate of reports about such sales, former Undersecretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger summoned Israeli Ambassador Meir Rosenne to protest the Israeli sales to Iran. According to a witness, the ambassador conceded that Israel had made such sales in the past but insisted they had been stopped.

But the Israelis, U.S. officials say, never abandoned their efforts to get the U.S. more deeply involved in supplying arms to Iran.

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